
The many invisible “Gaza Strips” in the forests

During the last weeks, the world became an impotent witness to the horror of the Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip. Although the images transmitted by TV barely reflected a small part of the suffering of the Palestinian people, they were more than enough to understand the dramatic situation they were going through. Entire families being wiped out by bombs; homes, schools, shops, hospitals and temples reduced to rubble in a matter of seconds; water, sewage and energy systems destroyed; fear, wrath, pain, weariness, hunger and thirst.

What much of the world doesn't know – because they are never included in the mass media's news – is that there are other very similar situations to that of the Gaza Strip taking place almost daily in different parts of the planet. The weapons employed may be different and the number of people affected fewer, but the results are the same: violation of people's human rights and destruction of their means of livelihood.

For example, on 18th December 2008 hundreds of police and paramilitaries stormed a village in the Sumatran province of Riau, Indonesia, with teargas and guns. A helicopter dropped an incendiary bomb on the village burning hundreds of houses allegedly with napalm. Teargas and fire arms were used. Two toddlers were killed and many people were injured while others were arrested. Some 400 villagers fled into the forest in the mountains and just 58 people remained in the village. Two days later, a helicopter flew at low height over the tents of homeless villagers and bombarded them with stones.

The reason for so much violence may seem absurd: the manufacture of paper. However, as in the case of the Palestinian conflict, the key issue is territorial control. The Indonesian Government ignores the traditional rights of the local people and allocates itself land ownership which it then transfers to a company to plant trees to produce paper. The local communities resist eviction and the government's response is violence.

Similar situations are taking place all the time and the issue of territorial control is always present as one of the central causes. For example, each time a government decides to build a large hydroelectric dam it is violating the rights of thousands or hundreds of thousands of people who live in the area and whose homes, forests and fields are going to be flooded or whose means of survival are going to be seriously affected by the dam. What generally happens is that people do not accept this situation passively and then the State intervenes using repression and criminalizing the protest.

The same happens when a State grants logging, oil or mining concessions to a company. The affected territory is not empty, but inhabited by indigenous, traditional or peasant communities, that in many cases have been living there long before the existence of the national State. However, the latter ignores the ancestral rights of these communities and allocates itself the right of ownership over those lands.

It is important to point out that for these peoples the destruction of the forest is similar to what took place in the Gaza Strip: the destruction of homes, temples, schools, shops, hospitals, drinking water

systems. For these peoples, the forest is their home and their temple and from it they obtain their food, medicines, fertilizers, fibres, wood, water and everything they require for their livelihood. The disappearance of the forest and the environmental degradation resulting from the industrial activities that take over – logging, monoculture plantations, mining or oil exploitation, hydro-energy, etc. – are like “bombs” that are thrown on their territories, destroying all that is of value to them.

“We are all Palestinians”. Under this slogan, thousands of people all around the world demonstrated their support to the Palestinian people and their rejection of the attack by the State of Israel on the Gaza Strip. Many other “Palestinians” – such as the Ayoreo in Paraguay, Adivasi in India, Bagyeli in Central Africa, Tagaeri and Taromenane in Ecuador/Peru and many others – are today being “bombed” and need support in their unequal struggle against an enemy that is much more powerful than they are.